

Caveats of an English Conversation Club

By JoEllen M. Simpson, Carlos E. Ossa, and Frank P. Rutter

Finding opportunities to speak English in a country which does not have English as its native language can be difficult for the language student. It was because of this need for an English-speaking environment that the English Conversation Club (ECC) was initiated at the Universidad del Valle in Cali, Colombia. The club started in 1992 and has been going strong ever since under the leadership of Professor Carlos E. Ossa.

The following article is a summary of several years of questionnaires given out to new members and visitors to the club, and the object of this article is to suggest ways in which other university communities can better serve their English-speaking populations by creating a similar English conversation club.

The ECC began meeting on September 18, 1992. The idea stemmed from the founder's involvement in the COFE Project (Colombian Framework of English), a joint project of the British and Colombian governments. This Project was designed to improve the quality of professors and teachers of English at universities offering EFL programs. The founder of the club had the chance to travel to London's Thames Valley University under a grant by the COFE Project, where the idea for the ECC was born.

From its very beginning, the ECC has attempted to offer the university community a space where students, professors, and staff can participate in a variety of informal activities in a relaxed atmosphere. The main goals are to have fun and to improve the members' knowledge of English. During the meetings, the members share experiences in an autonomous and spontaneous way without the fear of being evaluated since no grades are administered.

Initially, the ECC was planned to meet every other week, but after the second meeting the members urged the founder to meet weekly. So, from that time on the ECC has met every Friday (except for holidays) from 1:00 pm to 3:00 pm, where an average of 25 members get together to enjoy the expected and the unexpected.

The three authors of this article plan weekly activities that focus on all skills of language learning. In addition to these weekly activities, there are frequent visitors. Through various contacts, including electronic mail and our home page on the World Wide Web

<http://mafalda.univalle.edu.co/~carlossa>

many people find out about our club and come to the meetings when they are in Cali. Most frequently, we receive visits from English-speaking foreigners who are living, working, and raising families in Cali.

There is also a special activity every semester called the Total Immersion Excursion (TIE). One weekend of each semester is selected for traveling with a small group of members to a camping

area near Cali. During this weekend, from the time the members board the bus to leave to the time they come back and say "goodbye," they must speak in English. An average of 15 to 17 members go on these TIE trips, and all of them remember happy times and a sense of improvement in English.

Who Attends?

The ECC was created to provide a space for students from the Modern Languages Department of our university to practice the four skills, but specifically speaking in English. According to the questionnaires from the first year and a half, there were 20 different students who came from the Modern Languages Department, and in more recent years, an additional 11 students from the department have visited the club. In addition, a total of 96 students from other departments (mainly biology, medicine, psychology, and social communication) have visited the club. So, although the club was created for the Modern Language students to give them stress-free practice in speaking English, other students from other departments have shown much more interest in the club's activities.

Interestingly, in addition to the students who have come to the club, a number of professionals have become regular members.

This high number of students makes it look as if the club meetings are very large with more than 100 members, but, in fact, there is a group of about 10 members who comes every week, and another group of about 20 who comes two to three times a month. This core group, plus new weekly members or visitors, keeps the total weekly number at about 25 to 30.

What Do the Questionnaires Tell Us?

The new-member questionnaire is given to any new face that appears at the ECC meetings. There are a number of questions asking each individual to explain what they expect from their time spent in the club and what preferences and desires they have for improving it.

The first question asks individuals about their expectations of the club. The overwhelming majority say that they come to practice English, to improve their English, or even to learn English. Although most who come have at least a beginner's knowledge, there are some who assume that it is a "class," and that they will be "taught" English systematically. These are frequently visitors who do not return to future meetings, due to the more advanced level of the majority of the members.

Another important expectation is to meet new people. Only a small number of people list having fun as a primary expectation, even though one of the goals of the organizers is to make the meetings as diverse and entertaining as possible.

There are several questions which request suggestions or desires for activities at club meetings. A popular suggestion has been game playing. Some specific examples are charades, word problems, and guessing games. Songs and acting (drama) are also popular with newcomers.

Although most of the suggestions are positive, probably reflecting experiences members have had in regular English classes, there are occasional negative comments. For example, one person

suggested that fewer members be allowed into the club (surely this comment came from one of the days when more than 60 people showed up for the club's birthday and birthday cake). Another suggested that the club not meet in a classroom on campus, but rather meet outside in a less formal environment.

When asked what they could do as regularly attending members to "contribute to the success of the club," most suggested attending regularly and inviting new people, which is actually what happens with the regulars. They frequently bring friends and tell other people about the club in hopes that they will attend. Others volunteer to give talks on their areas of study or work, but in fact, few go beyond their written offer and actually speak to the group. A number of students also volunteer to bring music or even games to the club, but again, very few actually fulfill their "promises."

Because of the transitory nature of many visitors the current school year saw changes in the questionnaire. One new question asked new members what would guarantee their continued attendance. The most popular responses were singing, lectures, movies, and games. It is interesting to note that there is always a new song and at least one new language game. There are frequent lectures, and the companion Movie Lovers Club meets once a week immediately after the ECC meetings. It is hoped that there will now be an increase in the number of members at the movies.

What Do We Suggest to Other Clubs?

Based on our experience with the ECC at the Universidad del Valle, we can say that the idea of the English language club is very popular with its members. Although there are a number of people who come only once, there are also regular additions to the group of core members, insuring a slow, but steadily increasing membership.

One very important suggestion is to have a coordinator who is very enthusiastic and willing to put lots of time into the management and promotion of the club. The start of any club like this is slow, and a persevering coordinator will help to advance the club and make it a regular feature of your school.

One of the biggest successes we have had for increasing membership is the annual birthday party. In addition to the regular activities, we serve cake and soft drinks to anyone who comes to the birthday meeting. As can be imagined, the number of "members" increases drastically during the entire month of the birthday party.

In closing, we give you the ECC theme song, which was written by Dr. Frank Rutter, with lyrics and music by club members.

We generally start or end each club meeting with this very popular song.

You and Me and the ECC

Come and practice at the ECC
To see what fun English can be.

Come on now and bring a friend.
No better way the week can end!

Come to be with us and see
How we can talk, yes you and me.
How much better will our English be.
Don't miss this opportunity.

We love our club, the ECC.
Its fun and its variety.
And all we do, the games we play,
The music and the speeches. Hey!

At the end of a long hard week
We have a place to go and speak.
And in English you will see
How you make friends so pleasantly.

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